

International Languages in Schools in Wales Languages Matter – Talking Points

Executive summary

This thematic report examines the teaching and learning of international languages in primary, secondary and all-age schools in Wales. It evaluates the progress made in implementing international languages within the Curriculum for Wales. It considers the quality of teaching and its impact on learning, and how leaders influence provision for international languages in their schools. The review also considers how schools promote language learning, pupils' attitudes toward international languages, and the challenges that persist in encouraging pupils to study international languages at The General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and beyond.

The report highlights examples of how primary schools have successfully developed international languages in the curriculum. There are examples of good quality teaching and learning in the primary, secondary and all-age schools we visited. However, in general, curriculum design and the quality of teaching remains inconsistent. As a result, the experiences and opportunities available to pupils in international languages are too variable. Transition arrangements between the primary and secondary phases are often weak and uptake at GCSE and A Level is low. Taking these issues into account, the future of international language education in Wales remains challenging.

This report evaluates four key areas:

- **International languages in the primary phase:** Since international languages became integrated into the Curriculum for Wales in the primary phase in September 2022, many of the primary and all-age schools we visited had made positive strides in embedding international language learning. Most of the schools focused appropriately on developing pupils' listening and speaking skills and broadening pupils' cultural understanding. However, overall, curriculum development remains inconsistent. A few schools struggled due to a lack of staff confidence, their perceptions of limited curriculum time and insufficient professional learning opportunities. In the most effective schools, language learning was embedded across the curriculum. In these schools, pupils were exposed to languages from an early age, fostering a multilingual ethos.
- **International languages in the secondary phase:** While most secondary schools in our sample provided suitable opportunities for international language learning in Years 7-9, uptake at Key Stage 4 and post-16 remains low. Curriculum time constraints, the perception that languages are difficult and the pressures of the options process contributed to the decline. Where language provision was strong, teachers used authentic and creative resources, useful technology, and highly engaging teaching strategies to progress pupils' knowledge and skills. However, in some cases, over-reliance on teacher support prevented pupils from developing as independent learners of languages. Schools with effective teaching and a rich curriculum had stronger pupil engagement, particularly at GCSE and GCE Advanced Levels (A levels).
- **Pupil attitudes and engagement:** Many pupils in the schools we visited enjoyed learning

international languages and recognised the benefits for travel, communication, and employment. However, as they progressed through school, their enthusiasm often declined due to a lack of perceived relevance of language learning and confidence in their ability to succeed. Some pupils believed that learning Welsh was sufficient, while others saw languages learning as challenging compared to other curriculum subjects. Parents and carers who responded to our survey generally valued language learning, but our survey identified a need for improved communication with parents and carers about its long-term benefits.

- **Leadership and support for international languages:** It was clear from our evidence that strong leadership plays a crucial role in sustaining international language provision. In schools where leaders prioritised language learning, pupils had better access to high-quality teaching, clear progression routes, and enrichment opportunities. However, in many schools, senior leaders did not consider international languages as a strategic priority, often resulting in inconsistent or weaker provision. Collaboration between primary and secondary schools was often poor, affecting how well pupils made progress from the primary into the secondary phase. Those schools who engaged with school improvement services and external organisations told us that they valued their support, but access to professional learning and resources varied widely across Wales. Teacher recruitment for international languages remains a significant challenge, with declining numbers of student teachers entering the profession.
- **The role of wider system support:** While programmes, such as Global Futures, and support from local and regional school improvement services have influenced language provision positively, school leaders were concerned about long-term sustainability. Further education colleges offer limited international language pathways, and language provision within vocational programmes is too variable. Initial teacher education providers face recruitment difficulties, with low numbers of international language student teachers.

This report makes recommendations for schools, local authorities and school improvement services, and the Welsh Government. These recommendations focus primarily on improving teaching and learning, developing stronger curriculum arrangements at transition points to ensure progress and continuity in pupils' learning, and supporting schools to maintain and improve provision for GCSE and A level international languages courses.

Our recommendations

Schools should:

- Strengthen teaching to improve pupils' knowledge and skills, and their confidence to use the target language spontaneously and independently
- Improve curriculum planning and transition arrangements to ensure that pupils build on prior learning when moving from the primary phase to the secondary phase
- Review curriculum planning and timetabling to ensure sufficient time is allocated to international languages, to support pupils to make effective progress and achieve their potential

Local authorities and school improvement services should:

- Strengthen professional learning to ensure that teachers and, where appropriate, support staff, develop confidence and expertise in delivering international languages, particularly in the primary phase
- Work with schools to ensure that all pupils have access to international languages qualifications,

particularly where opportunities in individual schools at GCSE and A Level are limited

The Welsh Government, and where relevant Medr, should:

- Strengthen the guidance available to schools and other stakeholders, to support pupils and their families to understand the value of learning international languages at GCSE and A Level
- Strengthen curriculum support for international languages to help schools plan more effectively for progression and continuity of learning, particularly as pupils move from the primary to the secondary phase
- Develop a national approach to support school improvement services, schools, colleges and ITE partnerships to ensure the long-term sustainability of international languages teaching and learning in Wales.